



Truth Matters

A Publication Discussing Matters Related To Truth Because Truth Matters

Confessionism: The Misuse of 1 John 1:9

By Jim Elliff

Scripture Reading
Week of
September 4th - 10th

Monday

- ❖ Isaiah 7, 8
- ❖ Proverbs 5
- ❖ Philippians 2

Tuesday

- ❖ Isaiah 9, 10
- ❖ Proverbs 6
- ❖ Philippians 3

Wednesday

- ❖ Isaiah 11, 12
- ❖ Proverbs 7
- ❖ Philippians 4

Thursday

- ❖ Isaiah 13, 14
- ❖ Proverbs 8
- ❖ Colossians 1

Friday

- ❖ Isaiah 15, 16
- ❖ Proverbs 9
- ❖ Colossians 2

Saturday

- ❖ Isaiah 17, 18

Sunday

- ❖ Isaiah 19, 20

Do you believe that you must confess every known sin to God?

For many years earlier in my ministry, I made statements such as the following:

In order to be restored to fellowship with God and to be filled with the Spirit you must confess every known sin to God.

What am I to think of such instructions now?

Sadly, this teaching adds a layer of requirement for our forgiveness not intended by God. And it may lead to confusion and sanctification troubles for the believer if taken seriously.

My Experience with Confessionism

The word confession in the original comes from the conjoining of two words, "to say" and "the same." Confession means to agree with God on his assessment of our actions and thoughts, and to name our sin to God.

I did not find "confessionism" in the dictionary, but will coin the word as a way to name the practice and the teaching that believers are under a necessity to confess every known sin to God as a vital ingredient of their sanctification.

I had considerable experience in this practice early on. And I put many others under the burden of it also. I won't say that God did not use this method in some ways for good during this period (I was, after all, attempting to draw near to God), but I finally came to a very different and much more liberating view of sin and forgiveness. And I came to regret having put myself and others under a bondage that I believe God did not intend. A wrong view of confession can lead those who are perfectionistic or overly sensitive by nature into a spiritual quagmire.

Biblically my former views on sanctification always circled back to one verse, 1 John 1:9. This verse was a

foundation for sanctification not only for me, but for those who were my teachers. Let me remind you of it here:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I took this verse to mean that each time I sinned I had to confess that specific sin to God (and to the others I sinned against—which in itself is true) in order to be forgiven and cleansed. If I did not do this, I was living an unforgiven and polluted life, one in which the Spirit was not free to work. To have unconfessed sin was to remain "in the flesh."

I did not believe that the verse meant that I was just to scratch the surface of my sinning, but that God demanded that I scour out each and every sin until it was brought before Him. It did not mean *some* sins but *every* sin. And it did not mean just the *big* ones, but the *smallest* of them also. It meant not only the specific

sin itself, but each occasion of that sin. I could not summarize my sins and say, "Lord, the usual."

All of this meant regular (daily, hourly, immediate) introspection of my life until every sin and every nuance of sin was laid before God in prayer. I made "sin lists" from time to time and could always write pages. I was determined to keep short accounts with God. In other words, confession of every sin was at the heart of my perception of sanctification. Without it, I was not filled with the Spirit. With it, and with a reliance on the Spirit called "reckoning myself dead to sin and alive to God," (sometimes described as putting Christ back on the throne of my life) I was "setting the Spirit free" to work in and through me. My sanctification was either "on" or "off," depending on my action in this area. If I confessed my sins and believed that Christ was on the throne, then He lived through me, but if I did not, He did not. It was a kind of semi-perfectionism. And it seemed to me to be the living out of 1 John 1:9.

John's Way of Dealing with the Believer's Sin

Now, let me spell out the fuller, more correct view of confession found in the 1 John passage surrounding the confessor's *locus classicus* (1:9). It will take a good reading of the context. I've emphasized some portions. Please carefully go over the following passage:

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as

He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.**

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. **If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

My little children, **I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.** And if anyone sins, we have an **Advocate** with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the **propitiation** for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. (1 John 1:5-2:2)

First, note that the passage spells out its purpose clearly—"I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin."

The purpose of the confessor's use of 1:9 is to get the Christian into a place of being forgiven and cleansed by God and therefore in fellowship with Him and filled with the Spirit, but the purpose of John was obedience. And this, in 1 John, is repeatedly given as the mark of the authentic Christian.

But note, secondly, that John demonstrates clearly that the believer's sins are *immediately* and *totally* covered by the sacrificial work of Christ. For instance, in verse 7 he asserts that the believer (who is consistently described as the one who walks in the Light), enjoys this promise: "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses [him] from all sin."

This action word (cleanses) is continuous, meaning that the blood of Jesus unfailingly cleanses the believer from his sin at all times. There could be no sin that the blood does not cover, confessed or not confessed. Though our sins were taken care of in the cross of Christ, and by His blood being spilled for us, it is applied immediately in time to every sin we commit the nano-second we commit it.

In 2:1-2, John makes things even clearer. He says that when the believer sins he has the Advocate's help who is the *propitiation* for our sins, and the sins of all kinds of people in the world. Propitiation means that a pleasing and satisfactory sacrifice was made by our Substitute already. Nothing more is required for forgiveness once we are in the family. If it were not clear enough from what we have already read, he removes all remaining confusion by adding: "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins *have been forgiven you* for His name's sake" (2:12).

We are as forgiven as we can be.

The Implications of Confessionism

Now, consider the implications of adding the work of confession for ongoing forgiveness with the data we presently have. If something more is required for forgiveness and cleansing from all unrighteousness (a state required for heaven), then the believer is in a dilemma. What if he fails to confess *one* sin? Is he unforgiven and not cleansed from all unrighteousness? This is not what propitiation and the continual immediate cleansing from sin by the blood assert. Must we add to what

God has so completely accomplished? Isn't Christ's death and the application of His blood enough? Doesn't this additional requirement diminish the cross by making my naming of a sin, *each* sin, a prerequisite to forgiveness?

So what about 1:9, the verse used by those who contend for confession of every sin?

Before unfolding the meaning of this text, I must remind you of the danger of looking to one verse to establish a doctrine. It is true that if our sanctification and forgiveness and cleansing from all unrighteousness depended upon just one verse, that would be enough to settle the issue. But it is highly unusual of God to mention such a major doctrine, one which would apply every day and hour of our lives, only one time in the New Testament.

To establish the confessionists' position, we would have to bypass the book of Romans, because it does not talk of confession of sins to God when it addresses our sanctification—as well as Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, the pastorals, James, and all the New Testament books, none of which speak of the confessionists' view. It is quite strange that it would have been missed by so many biblical authors who specifically address our sanctification. These writers do sometimes speak of confessing sins to one another, and of repentance, but never of a requirement to name every sin to God. This should lead us to examine the verse more carefully to see if we are interpreting it correctly. I contend that we are not.

My Convictions

I want to state my views about the verse. I don't claim infallibility here, of course, but I can say that I have given these matters a great deal of thought through the years. Having believed so strongly in the other direction, I did not think I could afford to be wrong.

Let me give you an expanded paraphrase of the text and then explain my emphases:

If we walk in the light, that is, if we are true believers, then we have fellowship with each other and this wonderful thing happens: the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us continually from all sin.

If we say we don't have sin, we are liars and the truth is not in us, that is, we are not true believers at all.

However, if we confess our sins (that is, we are now characterized by admitting sin as a sign of being a true Christian—a person who now walks in the Light), then God is faithful and righteous (on the basis of what Christ has done) to forgive us of *all* our sins, and to continually cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

For the confessionist, if I am right in this interpretation, this passage is now turned on its head. Instead of encouraging us to name every sin as a necessary means of ongoing sanctification, the passage is glorying in the *completed* and *sufficient* work of Christ. That is, in this passage we see just how forgiving God is in Christ and how his blood continually works on our behalf.

I'm seeing it this way:

1. Walking in the darkness is not a form of inferior Christianity, but is about living as a non-believer; walking in the Light is not being spiritual as a Christian, but is just a description of being a true Christian.
2. Obedience or walking in the Light characterizes all true believers, although this does not imply perfection.
3. The believer is continually cleansed from all sin and nothing more could be done to accomplish that end other than what Christ has already done for the believer.
4. The believer enjoys fellowship with God and other believers.
5. Believers know that they have sin and readily admit their sins. Of all people, believers are the most sensitive and knowledgeable of their sins. In other words, walking in the Light not only means that we are substantively changed by God in terms of obedience, but that we see our sins clearly and admit them. If people who profess to be Christian do not admit their sins freely, then they are deceived. They also make God a liar and prove that His word is not in them.
6. This admission of our sins is not about naming each individual sin to God, however, but is the opposite

characteristic of those who say they have no sin.

7. "Forgive us our sins" and "Cleanse us from all unrighteousness" are salvation terms, not sanctification terms. Perhaps the word "all" ought to be in italics!
8. This state of acknowledging sin describes the true believer—he does not hide what he is and what he does. If one comes to Christ having had this transformation into openness, he has stepped into the Light. John is not saying that a believer must name every sin in order to be sanctified. He is saying that this characteristic admission of sins found in the person who has become a believer is that which obtains the result of his being totally forgiven and cleansed from every sin on the basis of the death of Christ.
9. God is faithful and just to forgive every sin and cleanse from all unrighteousness because of Christ's atonement alone. In other words, the believer does not confess in order to get something. What he seeks he already has.
10. Nothing more needs to be done after a person comes to Christ to merit forgiveness or cleansing. "Propitiation" means that God has been entirely satisfied with the payment His son gave on the cross. Even if the believer sins, he has the Advocate who is the full propitiation for his sins standing in for him.

11. God does intend, as the passage teaches, for the believer not to sin (1 John 2:1), therefore ongoing repentance of sin is a characteristic of our walk with God—our walk in the Light. Ongoing repentance is different than naming every sin.

Confessionism is a Problem for Us

If this passage is a call to immediate confession of every sin we are in trouble:

1. We are in a logistical dilemma. We cannot remember every sin. If our forgiveness depends on this, we are in serious trouble. For this reason, most advocates of this theology say that the confession we are to do is to be for every *known* sin. But that is an accommodation to the text. It does not say that. Actually, no Christian has confessed every known sin either.
2. We are in a theological dilemma. We have a Catholic theology of sorts. That is, if forgiveness is dependent on our ongoing confession, then what if we die with unconfessed sins? Does this view of confession of every sin being essential for forgiveness and total cleansing mean that our sins are not separated from us like the east is from the west? Does it mean we are not forgiven? Does it mean we are not cleansed from all unrighteousness? In other words, does it mean that

the work of Christ on our behalf is ineffective when it comes to forgiveness and cleansing? Does it mean that we are not justified until we get to the end of life, and only then if we have confessed everything?

3. We are in an exegetical dilemma. By this I mean that we cannot reconcile the fact that the same text admits to a continual cleansing from all sins on the basis of the blood with no conditions for the believer, while also requiring the condition of detailed confession in a contiguous verse.

What God is after is not our *naming* our sins, but our *turning from* our sins in obedience. He requires repentance from specific sins. He already knows what you do. As Trapp says: Amendment of life is the best repentance. This is the life of the believer. Naming all our sins may be therapeutic, certainly, but it can never be said to be required.

At the same time, I want to assert that naming sins is normal for the believer. In fact, this is the assertion of the text. We freely admit sins to each other and God. It is natural for us to do so because God has given us a clearer view of ourselves. It is within our new natures. We need not feel that God requires we should *never* name a sin to God. But it is not the aim of our preaching and teaching to get people to enumerate sins to God. We may name our sins on the way to repentance, but we do not do so *in order* to be forgiven or cleansed. We trust Christ's work for that, alone.

One Additional Passage

I have to bring one more passage to your attention, or you will find it and call me a liar. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated in his model prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Immediately after this prayer, anticipating some misunderstanding, He further says, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Mt. 6:12, 14-15).

I'll admit that Jesus has said that we should ask for forgiveness, but, again, we need to look more closely. He is really saying this: Forgive us as, or in

the same way, that we have forgiven others. In other words, I'm asking that your forgiveness of me (which we can say is full and free in Christ's sacrifice, needing nothing else) would be the same as my forgiveness of others.

He then states that this forgiveness of others in the believer is so standard, so much a part of what it means to be a Christian, that no true believer is without it. If you are not a forgiver, you are not forgiven. To not be forgiven is to be damned to spend eternity in hell.

Christ is talking not in specifics about confessing every sin before God. He is rather talking in generalities about the nature of salvation. He is saying: Please make the nature of your forgiveness to us the same as that we

have toward others. It says nothing about specific confession, but it does tie forgiveness of sins to the new nature He gives true believers.

In the New Testament, there are no other references requiring the confession of individual sins to God. The Christian is a person who is totally cognizant of his sins and open about them (though he should use discretion when speaking of them). But he is also one who must not diminish the effect of the cross and the blood in his life. To do so does not glorify Christ's work as complete.

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God is Faithful to All His Promises

Promise 24: Promises to do you good



Isaiah 43:2

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and
the flame shall not consume you.

Isaiah 46:1-3

Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts
and livestock; these things you carry are borne as
burdens on weary beasts. [2] They stoop; they bow
down together; they cannot save the burden, but
themselves go into captivity. [3] "Listen to me, O house
of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who
have been borne by me from before your birth, carried
from the womb.